Defining Human Services: A Discourse Analysis

Susan O. Kincaid
Western Washington University

Abstract

In this study, a definition of the study of human services is extrapolated from the discourse analysis of seven human services introductory texts and the philosophical statements of 11 university human services baccalaureate degree programs. Data that was congruent between these two sources was triangulated with the National Standards for Human Services Education of the Council for Standards for Human Service Education. The definition was reviewed by a group of professors and practitioners at a national conference to help define the limitations of the study and make recommendations for future study.

Introduction

Students attracted to a career helping others sometimes explore the study of human services. They often ask what they will study and quite reasonably expect to receive a succinct definition similar to what they might receive when exploring other disciplines. For example, in psychology, they might be told it is the study of the mind and behavior; sociology is the study of humans living together in groups; and anthropology is the study of humankind (Merriam-Webster, 2009). What, then, is the study of human services? Often, at least from this researcher, they receive a response describing what human services professionals do or the settings in which they do it. This reply is usually couched in terms of an interdisciplinary knowledge base and includes references to helping and systems. This answer reflects the literature and educational standards of the field but does not provide a succinct definition of what students will actually study.

Perhaps the current lack of a succinct definition reflects the history and age of the profession, its emergence in response to governmental decisions to hire indigenous human services workers who might better relate to communities, and the development of human services associate and technical degree programs in response to the Community Mental Health Centers Act of 1963 (Mandell & Schram, 2006; Neukrug, 2004; Woodside & McClam, 2006). The hiring and training of human service workers in response to government policies did not require the articulation of a definition. It required a skill set.

The study of human services may appear to lack a succinct definition; however, there is an abundance of evidence to validate human services as a study and discipline. There are numerous higher education programs from associate's through doctoral degrees, approximately 100

of which are members of the Council for Standards for Human Service Education ([CSHSE], 2005, Members). There are National Standards for Human Services Education (CSHSE, Standards) and a discipline accrediting body for degree programs, the Council for Standards for Human Service Education created in 1976 (CSHSE, homepage). In addition, there are many textbooks published dating back to the 1970s (e.g., Eriksen, 1977). There are more than 16 texts currently published by Brooks/Cole alone, some of which are in their 6th and 7th editions (Cengage, 2009, Brooks/Cole, *An Introduction to Human Services*). There are at least two refereed journals dedicated to human services, *Human Service Education* published by the National Organization for Human Services and *Human Services Today* published by the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh.

The field of study and profession are further validated by the existence of professional organizations. The National Organization for Human Services (NOHS, 2009) is open to professionals, educators, and students in the field of human services. Among other things, NOHS hosts an annual national conference providing an opportunity for educators and practitioners to present their research to colleagues. In addition, there are numerous regional professional organizations (NOHS, Inside NOHS, Regions), some of which host annual regional conferences. The profession is further defined by a professional code of ethics (NOHS, Ethics) and a voluntary professional certification process (NOHS, Certification).

These groups provide forums for publishing and presenting research related to the constructs, knowledge, theory, skills, values, and ethics of the profession. They include opportunities for dialogue and networking. It does not appear that any of these groups has yet provided a cogent and succinct statement defining the study of human services that could be used with initiates and students.

The apparent lack of a succinct statement generally accepted among professional groups and educators in the introductory course textbook led to this study aimed at answering the following question: *Can a definition of the study of human services be inferred through the analysis of introductory textbooks, philosophical statements of university programs, and the CSHSE National Standards for Human Service Education?*

Methodology

This study was conducted using discourse analysis and constant comparison methods. Discourse analysis involves the examination of language and concepts between texts in search of patterns associated with a particular topic. It "provides a range of approaches to data and, crucially, also a range of theorizations of that data" (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001, p. ii). During this process, a constant comparison method is

used to simultaneously develop and compare categories of data as each source is reviewed. The data collected is constantly compared across all categories to develop additional or modify existing categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). In this study, data sets collected from the textbooks and university philosophical statements were compared for congruence, that is, to see if they match. The convergent data were then compared to the National Standards for Human Services Education (CSHSE, 2005) for triangulation. Triangulation increases the construct validity and reliability of a study (Yin, 1994).

Three sources of data were examined: (a) seven introductory textbooks (see Appendix A), (b) eleven university philosophical statements (see Appendix B), and (c) the National Standards for Human Services Education (CSHSE, 2005, Standards). The introductory textbooks were conveniently chosen to reflect those that would be sent by publishers to instructors who teach introductory courses. The university philosophical statements were purposely obtained from members of the CSHSE (2005, Members) that offer baccalaureate degrees in human services and agreed to the use of their statements in the analysis. The standards were obtained from the CSHSE website (2005, Standards).

The study was conducted in the following sequence: (a) discourse analysis using the constant comparison method of the introductory textbooks, (b) discourse analysis using the constant comparison method of the university philosophical statements, (c) comparison of the data from the first two steps to discover the points of convergence between the two sets of data, and (d) a comparison of the data congruent between both sets to the National Standards for Human Services Education (CSHSE, 2005, Standards) to see if there was triangulation.

An examination of the preface, introduction, first three chapters, and glossary (if there was one) of each textbook was conducted in search of a definition and other data that might support a definition. Additionally, all references to human services in the index were examined. Data repeated between texts from which a definition might be inferred were collected and categorized. Nothing in this study should be construed as a criticism or even a critique of the seven textbooks reviewed. Although a specific definition was not found in the texts, there were congruent data from which a definition could be inferred including: (a) lists and descriptions of what human services professionals do, (b) lists and descriptions of the places and contexts in which human services are delivered, (c) references to various theories and disciplines from which the knowledge base for the text was drawn, and (d) statements regarding the values of the human services profession.

The university philosophical statements were examined for common themes, theories, values, and definitions. All 11 universities

were members of the Council for Standards for Human Service Education. Nine of the universities were accredited by the Council. Two additional programs were contacted but did not respond. Nothing in this study should be construed as a criticism or even a critique of the university philosophical statements.

In hopes of continued discourse moving toward professional agreement, the researcher set specific goals for the definition. In order to be inclusive of the individual programs and publications in existence, the definition of the study of human services must: (a) be broad enough to include an interdisciplinary knowledge base, (b) honor the historical context of human services, (c) set direction for the profession and at the same time allow for change and maturation, (d) be pertinent for technical through graduate degree programs, (e) allow for the uniqueness of programs, and (f) provide a framework for scholarly research. In addition, the definition, like all definitions, must be cogent, precise, and succinct.

Findings

A preexisting succinct definition of the study of human services was not found in the data examined; however, the data collected revealed several recurring themes. It became apparent that there were four points of triangulation: (a) integrated interdisciplinary knowledge base, (b) client self-determination, (c) processes to facilitate change, and (d) systemic change at all levels of society. Each of these areas of triangulation was considered an essential component of the proposed definition. In the sections that follow, each essential component of the definition is explained using examples from the three data sources: textbooks, university philosophical statements, and National Standards for Human Services Education (CSHSE, 2005). These essential components lead to and are incorporated in the proposed definition.

Essential Component: Integrated Interdisciplinary Knowledge Base

Every textbook made reference to interdisciplinary knowledge and interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary practice and problem solving. For example, Woodside and McClam (2006) described human services work as "A treatment approach that utilizes problem solving to work with clients and their problems within the environment" (p. 337). Poindexter, Valentine, and Conway (1998) stated, "Human services workers are trained to provide a wide range of emotional and practical support to a wide variety of persons who are seeking assistance with life's difficulties and challenges" (p. 6).

In the university philosophical statements, references were made to various iterations of systems theory (e.g., systems theory, ecological systems theory, change theory), behavior change theory, human development and life span, and adult learning theory and transformative

education. Standard 2 of the National Standards for Human Service Education (CSHSE, 2005, Standards) is prefaced by the statement, "A benchmark of human services education and services delivery is the interdisciplinary approach to learning and professionalism. Curriculum development integrates specific theories, knowledge and skills that are tied to a conceptual framework and underlying philosophy." Standard 6 further requires that the human services faculty have "education in various disciplines."

There is also a difference between studying multiple disciplines independently and studying an interdisciplinary curriculum that is intentional in integrating information from various disciplines to enhance understanding and problem-solving skills. Each of the introductory texts addressed this issue. The use of the words *integrated interdisciplinary* was an attempt to be succinct in capturing this concept.

Essential Component: Client Self-Determined

Client self-determination was mentioned in every text and was mentioned or implied in all university statements. It is also mentioned in the specifications for CSHSE Standard 19 as one of the values held by the profession and is included in the professional ethics of the National Organization for Human Services (2009). Furthermore, allowing clients to make their own decisions, "helping them confront and solve the gamut of life's problems" (Mandell & Schram, 2006, p. 22), is the basis of strengths-based models and a reflection of the power held by clients over their own lives. "The paramount goal of human services," stated Eriksen (1977), "is to enable people to live more satisfying, more autonomous, and more productive lives" (p. 12). Whether the client is an individual, family, group, or community, it is the client who determines what, if any, change is in order.

Essential Component: Processes to Facilitate Change

Facilitators guide processes whereby people solve their own problems. Processes originate from theoretical constructs that can be identified and used to predict outcomes. The concept of *processes to facilitate* is further supported by the theories defined as the knowledge base in textbooks and university statements. Each textbook contained information on problem solving. If we accept the value of client self-determination as a guiding principle for delivery of human services and strengths-based models as the preferable means of problem solving, the human services professional must be seen as a facilitator rather than an expert who dictates or prescribes solutions.

In the introduction to their text, Burger and Youkeles (2004) stated, "We wrote this text in the hope of enhancing the student's capacity to facilitate the lives of others" (p. xi). "Problems are part of living, and no one—regardless of education, income, or profession—is

immune" (Mandell & Schram, 2006, p. 3). Mandell and Schram describe the layers of human services work through direct and indirect services and advocacy related to policy change. Professionals who understand the levels at which change is possible can be intentional in designing and facilitating processes for that change.

Essential Component: Systemic Change at all Levels of Society

The language for this phrase was taken partially from Standard 12 of the CSHSE National Standards for Human Service Education. It should be noted that the Specifications for Standard 19 regarding the incorporation of human services values include, "Belief that individuals, services systems, and society can change" (CSHSE, Standards). The standards require that this value be included in the curriculum.

Every university statement included change, and all of the textbooks discussed change at differing levels of society. In their introduction, Mandell and Schram (2006) used the analogy of a seesaw and how the view changes as the seesaw moves up and down. Eriksen (1977) used the analogy of human services as a bridge connecting people with services, going so far as to state that services are the right of every U.S. citizen. In a similar discussion, Woodside and McClam (2006) stated, "Problems are part of living, and no one—regardless of education, income, or profession—is immune" (p. 3). Burger and Youkeles (2004) talked about systems as potential culprits and the need for professionals to be able to analyze systemic influences.

Whether providing direct services, advocating for individual clients, or attempting to effect change in social attitudes or policies, human service professionals are involved with change across all levels of human systems. As Cimmino (1999) stated, "The human services model places a portion of responsibility on society for creating conditions that reduce opportunities for people to be successful by perpetuating social problems" (p. 14). Although the framing varied, every text talked about the need to solve problems of individuals by changing the systems that contribute to those problems.

> If human services is to benefit from history, it must maintain an alert interest in systematically monitoring and evaluating itself and stimulating changes wherever they are indicated to remove any barrier between people and adequate appropriate services. Its efforts in this direction will be guided by the assumption that if things are not working out well, we may need to change the systems, *not* the people. The greatest strength of human services is making systems fit people. (Eriksen, 1977, p. 14)

Even the texts that stressed individual change and direct services included advocacy and activism as means to systemic change and the responsibility of human services professionals.

Perhaps change is the most important concept in the definition.

Whether the client is an individual or community, whether the professional provides direct or indirect services, whether the outcome sought is behavioral, cultural, or political, the underlying goal of human services practice is change. In a separate analysis of introductory texts, Haynes (2005) concluded that the "most important concept was intervention" (p. 76). Intervention means to *come between*. Human services interventions come between people and the barriers to their well-being. In effect, interventions are change. "Human services is also a catalyst for change—for people and for systems" (Eriksen, 1977, p. 13).

Proposed Definition

Capturing these concepts in a definition resulted in a complicated sentence that, even though succinct, is difficult to grasp. *Grounded in an integrated interdisciplinary knowledge base, human services is the study of processes to facilitate client self-determined systemic change at all levels of society; personal, interpersonal, small group, family, organizational, community, and global.* While that sentence captures the depth of the findings, the definition can be simplified to: *human services is the study of processes of systemic change at all levels of society.*

Discussion and Collegial Feedback

Realizing the limitations of assertions created by a single investigator, this researcher presented the findings of the study at the 2008 annual conference of the National Organization for Human Services held in Tucson, Arizona. There were approximately 30 presentation participants including faculty representing various degree levels and institutions throughout the U.S. A few practitioners and students also attended.

The researcher facilitated dialogue regarding each essential component of the definition, and participants proposed changes to refine the definition. Given the type of setting, it is not possible to determine whether there was consensus of the participants around each change. Their responses almost exclusively related to word precision rather than challenges to the concepts captured by the definition. For instance, after identifying subtle differences between the terms interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary, and multidisciplinary, some participants asserted that multidisciplinary was a preferable term to interdisciplinary. Some suggested rewording *client self-determined* to *client-determined*. There was only positive feedback regarding the phrase *processes to facilitate*. There was a considerable dialogue regarding whether or not there was a need to specify the levels of systems and a recommendation by some that the definition simply say *systemic change*, dropping the ending phrase *at all levels of society; personal, interpersonal, small group, family, organizational, community, and global.* Incorporating the feedback of the

participants, the proposed definition would be simplified to say: *Human services is the multidisciplinary study of processes to facilitate client-determined systemic change at all levels of society.*

Conclusions

Both the proposed and simplified definitions are cogent, succinct, and congruent with the literature, university philosophical statements, and the National Standards for Human Services Education (CSHSE, 2005, Standards). They reflect the values of the field and the literature on human services. From these definitions, it can be extrapolated that *generalist human services professionals study and are prepared to facilitate processes for change at all levels of society.*

The formalization of the definition allows a different focus in the classroom. Instead of studying what they will do and where they will do it, students will begin to see themselves as experts on processes for change, whether that change is done through direct services, indirect services, advocacy, or activism. The where and how become details of the field secondary to the focus on systemic analysis and processes for change. The possibility of societal systems either meeting human needs or creating barriers to meeting those needs shifts the context of human problems from one of individual responsibility to one of community and society, a concept that was reiterated throughout the data. Problems can be viewed as layered, both the problem of the individual and the result of societal systems. As facilitators, students understand that their role as professionals will relate to initiating and sustaining client-determined change at all levels of society.

The response of the conference participants as word-smithing rather than debating concepts is an affirmation of the definition. This is especially validating given that many participants were university instructors teaching in human services degree programs. Many were familiar with one or more of the texts, the CSHSE National Standards for Human Services Education, and the National Organization for Human Services. Some were practitioners, researchers, and authors in the human services field.

This study provides a point of reference for further research and dialogue regarding the proposed definition of the study of human services. The limitations of this study, however, should not be overlooked. There are books and universities that were not included. The study is based on the analysis and interpretation of one researcher using a limited dataset. To be valid, the definitions need to be: (a) discussed extensively in rigorous focus groups, (b) accepted by a broader sample that is more representative of the field, including authors, practitioners, and instructors, (c) validated by a more comprehensive and expansive literature review, and (d) be the subject of quantitative study such as survey analysis.

The proposed definition begins to fill a gap in the literature. It brings together essential concepts and values in one cogent statement. If *human services* is to continue to emerge as a discipline in its own right, a definition adds strength to the existing trend in that direction as evidenced by publications, education, credentialing, ethics, standards, and national organizations. It provides a conceptual framework to focus both study and practice in the field.

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Woodside, M. K., & McClam, T. (2006). *An introduction to human services* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson-Brooks/Cole.

Yin, R.K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Appendix A

Schedule of Textbooks Used in Discourse Analysis

Burger, W. R. & Youkeles, M. (2004). *Human services in contemporary America* (6th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Eriksen, K. (1977). *Human services today*. Reston, VA: Reston/Prentice Hall.

Hull, G. H., Jr., & Kirst-Ashman, K. K. (2004). *The generalist model of human services practice*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole-Thomson Learning.

Mandell, B. R., & Schram, B. (2006). *An introduction to human services: Policy and practice* (6th ed.). Boston: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.

Neukrug, Ed. (2004). *Theory, practice, and trends in human services: An introduction* (3rd ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole-Thomson Learning.

Poindexter, C. C., Valentine, D., & Conway, P. (1998). *Essential skills for human services*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Woodside, M. & McClam, T. (2006). *An introduction to human services* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson-Brooks/Cole.

Appendix B

Schedule of University Philosophical Statements Used in Discourse Analysis

California State University-Fullerton, Fullerton, California

Fitchburg State College, Fitchburg, Massachusetts

Metropolitan State College of Denver, Denver, Colorado

Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon

Springfield College, Springfield, Massachusetts

Villa Julie College (now Stevenson University), Stevenson, Maryland

University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware

University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon

University of Scranton, Scranton, Pennsylvania

University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, Oshkosh, Wisconsin

Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington